

Ambient Drone and Apocalypse

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Celer and The End of Happiness

A good time to listen to Celer's music is early in the morning, around three o'clock. Any later, and road noise would drown it out. In the album *Salvaged Violets*, high- and low-pitched tones seep in, barely perceptible even on headphones. They are produced on synthesizers, processors of various sorts, and acoustic instruments, but their timbre is uniformly fragile. There are no abrupt attacks, and decays are always attenuated. These tones are too isolated to congeal into harmony; they merely align with each other momentarily, before washing out with the tide.

The disc player spins, and the laser reads the data. Naturally, this playback is identical to every other. It will be the same tomorrow, and however many tomorrows remain. I could well play this recording every morning, indefinitely, or at least until the electrical grid collapses. It would matter just as much to me if I heard it constantly, from now until the end.

Salvaged Violets might sound like other recent examples of pretty, quiet music. But this impression gives way with repeated listening, especially around the nine-minute mark. The sudden influx of rapidly oscillating drones, colliding as they compete for the same space, proves that this is not just a touristic celebration of beautiful sounds. This is the moment when one's toes clench the precipice shortly before jumping, or the moment immediately preceding the apocalypse. Celer's music, as with so much ambient drone, speaks of the end of time, the end of the world, and all the unresolvable dilemmas that accompany such ends.

Croesus was a Lydian king who believed himself blessed. He sought confirmation from Solon of Athens, the lawmaker revered for his wisdom. Croesus asks Solon, "Who is the happiest of all men?," whereupon Solon answers with stories of humble men who live to old age in obscurity, or else who die young in their sleep after winning favor from some god. But Croesus wanted Solon to name him the happiest. Solon responds, "[Mark] this: until he is dead, keep the word 'happy' in reserve. Till then, he is not happy, but only lucky."¹ This passage from Herodotus is famous, but what follows is more important. Solon admonishes Croesus to "look to the end," rather than the present. Croesus dismisses Solon, and only later learns the meaning in Solon's words. He loses a son in a hunting accident. He concludes

two years of mourning with the decision to attack the Persians, and his oracle responds that he will “destroy a great empire.”² Croesus is foolish enough to hear a presentiment of the fall of Persia, but the empire to fall is his own.

It would then appear that Croesus is about to reach his own end as the prisoner of the Persian tyrant Cyrus. He is about to be burned alive on a pyre. As the flames char Croesus’ hair, Cyrus is moved to spare Croesus, but his men cannot stop the fire’s spread. Croesus prays to Apollo for mercy, clouds rush in on what was a perfectly clear sky, and rains put out the fire that was to mark Croesus’s final, unhappy ending. Croesus spends the rest of his days as a guest and prisoner in the Persian court, trotted out anytime his captors seek counsel on the behavior of an enemy or the proper course of war. It may well be that Croesus narrowly missed a horrible ending to what had been a blessed life, but strangest of all is his subsequent resurrection, the turnabout that made a king into a slave, a ruler into an advisor.

I feel great joy, and great excitement. Something wonderful is coming—liberation from our bodies—but it is also something terrible. Billions of people will suffer. There is no way for me to justify how I could feel happy, by what right I can smile given what I know. And it’s unclear whether what I feel is even happiness at all. How can it be, if it cannot last? One could rewrite the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics* with apocalypse in mind:

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found in the time of apocalypse, when activities can no longer have ends. For naturally, in a time in which ends are irrelevant, when the final end precludes all other ends, the good takes on a different meaning. Where there are actions apart from ends, at least ends that lie in the future, it is the nature of the activities to stand apart from their products. We must thus concern ourselves with what right action and goodness are when the end is at hand. Now, as there have been many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends were also many; the end of economics was wealth, that of bomb-making a bomb, that of plastic manufacturing a plastic bottle. But where such arts meet with a certain end not only of one person, but of the entire civilization or even of the planet, the question of ends becomes moot. It now makes a great difference whether activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.³

Aristotle writes that the ultimate end of human activity is happiness—eudemonia. To attain eudemonia, we weigh present against future satisfaction, balancing virtues against necessities. But Aristotle says that happiness must be measured over a lifetime, that it cannot be reduced to a single moment.⁴ Spoken with the confidence of someone assured of a long life.

What is the ultimate end in the time of apocalypse? If we accept Aristotle's premise that it remains happiness, then how do we define happiness, and the virtues that inform our quest for happiness, when the end is imminent?

We delude ourselves that we will live long lives, that our relative happiness will be an average of joy and sorrow and boredom stretched out over the years. Apocalypse exposes this lie. It pushes us to take up Plato's call in the *Gorgias* to stop thinking about how long we have, and instead about how best we might live in whatever time remains.⁵ The truth I know in my bones is that the end is coming soon. I don't know when—a month from now, perhaps, or a week, or in five years. Eudemonia should be the same whether we live only five minutes more, or five decades more. I see all this, and yet the truth eludes me, for until recently, happiness has meant for me the idea of being happy at some point in the future or past, not the present. In the *Gorgias*, Zeus is said to have instituted a law that no one shall know their death ahead of time. Like that line at the end of *Blade Runner*: "Too bad she won't live. But then again, who does?" This is supposed to be our final tip-off that Deckard, like Rachel, is a replicant, and has no more than three years to live. But what it really tells us is that apocalypse only magnifies mortality, something already there, on a mass scale. Every individual's death is her own apocalypse, if only she would recognize it as such.

If Aristotle and Solon are right, then a life qualifies as happy only if it lasts a full duration, and ends happily. But if the apocalypse is drawing near, as it must considering our species' efforts to bring it about, then all lives will have been cut short, and we will have died with the knowledge that the end was prematurely upon us. So none of us will be able to claim that we were happy in Aristotle's or Solon's terms. The only hope I have of proving these two Greeks wrong, of leaving evidence that I have known moments of blinding happiness, is to stop time even as it drags me with it. I now look to the end, but while searching for moments of joy that stop time altogether.

The music of Celer intimates what such happiness might feel like.⁶ It is achingly beautiful—loops of electronic tones, or field recordings or snatches of piano or cello fragments, played at low volumes. Celer is most courageous when it bypasses noise and technical tricks. It sounds like what it is to watch the moon set over the ocean at night, or to see one's beloved enter the room after a long absence. Celer's music is usually constructed with loops that repeat for a half-hour, or perhaps over an hour. Their duration does not matter, for this music has bestowed on me a happiness that no one, not even someone blessed with contented old age, has experienced. Boethius understands the lightness with which we can let go, after having been granted such joy; writing in house arrest before his execution, he notes that no evil can destroy the memory of happiness.⁷ His optimism puts to

shame Aristotle, who was neither imprisoned nor condemned to death, and who was therefore tepid in his joy.

And so the spinning continues. There is the spinning of the disc player, going over the same zeroes and ones that it has read every morning since I began listening to *Salvaged Violets*. There is the spinning beating of the tones, sometimes constant, other times accelerating from dissonance back to consonance. These are toy tops of sound that whirl and gyrate, going so fast while going nowhere at all. Self-contained, they are monads that reflect all these worlds of happiness, each in their own particular way. Take any one of these oscillations, increase its speed to the point where individual revolutions disappear within a perceived uniform total, and what we have is an edifice of eternal happiness—eternal for however long it lasts. So it is with every successive wave of sound in *Salvaged Violets*.

The ethics of apocalypse starts with this—that it should be no different than ethics for those who assume that death will come only in the distant, unspecified future.

Aristotle's definition of happiness requires that we remain virtuous, and virtue means that we “must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us.”⁸ But the immortal gods are none other than they who can live an eternity within a single moment—even if that moment is immediately followed by death. We mortals, however, are divorced from any comprehensive experience of time. We pass from moment to moment, too abject to grasp the unity in infinity; Plato, Aristotle, and Boethius all agree on this point. But Dostoyevsky knew better than all of them. He realized that one can live a lifetime of happiness within a few moments. He also understood that such moments come at great cost. In *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin speaks of a prisoner about to be shot before his sentence was commuted. The convict systematically spends his last few minutes—five minutes, which “seemed to him an infinite time, a vast wealth”⁹—taking leave of his comrades, thinking for the last time not in a rushed, delirious fashion, but almost happy, serene, perhaps ecstatic. He stares at the golden cupola of a distant church glittering in the sunshine. And then,

he said that nothing was so dreadful at that time as the continual thought, “What if I were not to die! What if I could go back to life—what eternity! And it would all be mine! I would turn every minute into an age; I would lose nothing, I would count every minute as it passed, I would not waste one!” He said that this idea turned into such a fury at last that he longed to be shot quickly.¹⁰

And so it must have been for Dostoyevsky himself, who thought these same thoughts when he was about to be put to death for political conspiracy before being similarly spared. Such an event must have exacerbated his epilepsy. Indeed, Prince Myshkin, who is also epileptic, feels a similar elation in the seconds immediately before a seizure, a flash of light during which “he had time to say to himself clearly and consciously, ‘Yes, for this moment one might give one’s whole life!’”¹¹ The price for that moment is exorbitant: pain, idiocy, total disconnection from all the bliss of the preceding moment, disconnection too from every other human. Myshkin lives an apocalypse of sorts every time he has a seizure, from which it takes him months to recover. In the intervening time, he must rebuild himself. The cosmic epiphany he experienced is irretrievable, at least until his next seizure.

Celer’s music also intimates a dear price. I am thinking now of “Of My Complaisance,” from *An Immensity Merely to Save A Life*. Eighteen minutes of a fragment lasting thirty-five seconds that is looped, with no variation, until the track’s close. The fragment consists of a short melody plus harmonic accompaniment played on the strings—setting of a synthesizer. There is ample reverb, and although there is a definite, discernible melody, the texture is smooth, with no percussive breaks or attacks. This melody for the most part outlines a major key, descending at first, until at its low point accompanying strings arrive on a single, held pitch high up in the ether. This is Prokofiev’s old trick, to land on low and high notes simultaneously, and just as in Prokofiev’s music, the gesture here seems to open a wide space that is beautiful and cavernous, terrifying. The bottom drops out.

Celer’s music is always beautiful. I don’t like relying on that word time and again, but one can’t overlook what “beautiful” means in the context of electronic music these days. So much electronica has assimilated ugliness and dissonance. Witness the very genre called “noise,” plus distillations of noise elements in glitch, drone, and metal. Celer stands apart by not relying on noise. A few other artists fall into this category: William Basinski, drone artists Capricornus, Kyle Bobby Dunn, and David Tagg, and other ambient drone artists who use either drone—sustained sonorities or loops to create multi-minute or –hour works of unmitigated beauty and consonance.

I mentioned just now the steep price of this music. This price is central to Celer’s story: the group began as a duo of Will Long and Danielle Basquet-Long, a married couple in their twenties. Their music and track titles, along with their photos taken from worldwide travels, shows a *grand amour*, not merely the happy burgeoning love of youth, but the love that, when it finds its beloved, says, “Ah yes, I’ve been waiting for you patiently. We’ve a lot of living to do, you and I.” Danielle Basquet-Long died of an undiagnosed heart condition in 2009, and Will Long has since released several recordings

featuring their work as a couple, Danielle's solo project Chubby Wolf, and Will's work as Celer. Any of these tracks sound like they could go on forever, and perhaps are currently going on forever in some other space. This is music of heaven, how we all might hope the afterlife to be, with no hint of kitsch. A few moments in this music might indeed be fair recompense for a lifetime's worth of disappointment, aggravation, and boredom. But the threat of an abrupt end—apocalypse—is latent in this music, too.

This sort of happiness confounds Aristotle's theory; we *can* experience happiness even if we do not have a complete life. We might hope for long, prosperous lives, with our material needs met, and with adequate freedom and opportunity for contemplation. But Aristotle here does not think with the mind or heart of a mystic. And a mystic is exactly what we need, someone who knows the liberation of which ambient drone speaks. A mystic like Hegel understands that happiness must contain its other, the end of happiness, just as infinity contains the finite. For Hegel, finite things contain "the germ of deace"; they are born at the same time that they die.¹² Celer explains what happiness—the ultimate end—would look like in a time of apocalypse because it reveals that *true* happiness of any sort is both eternal and susceptible to extinction at any moment.

There is no apocalypse, because apocalypse has always been, and will always be with us.

Thomas Köner and the End of the World

History abounds with tales of military leaders who risk everything for the end of the world, which might lie just over the hill. The Persian king Cyrus was a tactical savant, a political prodigy, whose arrogance undid everything those qualities had won him. He conquered Greece, Babylon, all of what is now Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Not content with those lands, he continued eastward into the land of the Massagetae, the nomadic tribes who lived in what is now Turkmenistan. The first real resistance his forces encountered came in the form of the queen Tomyris. Cyrus began his invasion with a marriage proposal; she refused. Cyrus proceeded to prepare a military incursion, which prompted the first of Tomyris' prophetic threats: Cyrus must leave, although Tomyris knows he will not. Tomyris then proposes a limited engagement between the two armies in a location of Cyrus' choosing, a means of containing the battle and its ravages. Cyrus eventually accepts these terms, and succeeds in introducing Tomyris' men to alcohol. Cyrus' army then slaughters the drunk Massagetae and captures Tomyris' grown son. She issues her second prophetic threat: release her son and leave her country. "If you refuse," she adds, "I swear by the sun our master to give you

more blood than you can drink, for all your gluttony.”¹³ Cyrus frees Tomyris’ son, who promptly kills himself. A battle ensues, one Herodotus claims is the bloodiest in history. Cyrus is killed, and Tomyris stuffs his decapitated head “into a skin which she had filled with human blood”¹⁴, to fulfill her prophecy that Cyris would inebriate himself with blood.

Tomyris’ roles in this story are multiple, and for that reason, unusual in a text where women seldom receive more than passing mention. She is a female body, a military commander, and a prophetess. She knows that Cyrus will not content himself with what he already possesses, and uses the very image of binging on blood to devise his punishment. And while Cyrus could have heeded Tomyris’ warnings, he persists, just as she predicts. His disregard for her prophecy is part of the prophecy.

Subsequent generals have learned nothing from Cyrus. Alexander also invaded the East, driving into Afghanistan and India before his troops forced a westward retreat. Alexander pulled his men back to Babylon before dying of a fever under suspicious circumstances, perhaps due to poisoning. Several centuries later, the Roman emperor Julian hoped to recreate Alexander’s campaign; he was murdered, probably by conspirators from within his army. These men knew what awaited Cyrus and themselves in their search for the east—most point. So did the Soviets and Americans who, in the name of homeland security or oil, pursued their own mad searches for the next mountain or cave that hid whatever enemy propaganda could conjure. Logic and history would have demanded that foreign occupiers halt and embed themselves within land they already controlled. Wealth and territory alone do not compel these invaders. So what drove these commanders to risk and lose everything, including, in the case of Cyrus and Alexander, their very lives?

When I was eleven years old, I spent two weeks at a summer soccer camp on Catalina Island. It was my first time away from my parents for longer than a night. I was excited to go, for I was used to seeing the island from my house, and had wanted to cross the channel for as long as I could remember. But after only a day, I wanted to leave. I stopped eating, cried in the middle of practice, games, mealtime and especially at bedtime. I was nervous for two weeks straight. The only time I was able to forget my grief—I suppose that it was fear that something would happen to my parents while I was away from them, and I would never see them again—was when our camp hiked to the isthmus, the mile-long flat strip of land that linked what in an earlier geological era were probably two separate islands. But this hike did not turn my depression into happiness. I was rather merely distracted, preoccupied with concerns indicative of mania. What does it mean to cross an island? The windward, west-facing side had always seemed to me an enigma. I often wondered how different it would be from the mainland-facing side. How

much more remote was it? And from that westward side, would I be able to see distant San Clemente, the island my brother told me had been blasted into flatness after decades of US Naval exercises, an island hidden from view from the Los Angeles coast? How would it feel to reach such a definitive end, albeit a geographical end, of the only world I knew after such a short walk?

I found what should have been satisfying responses to these questions when we reached the isthmus. It did indeed feel different on the far side of the island. It was windier, the waves were rougher, and there were no people or buildings. And yet, it was not entirely alien either. The craggy cliffs resembled those on the shore of the Palos Verdes peninsula where I lived, and the golden hills covered with oak and sage brush were like anything in the valleys north of Los Angeles. I was now present where previously I had only fantasized of going, and it was all disarmingly matter-of-fact. But that presence collapsed into a new absence, a new fixation: the other side of that ocean that extended itself over the next hemisphere. I began to wish that I could see all the way to Japan and China through the curvature of the earth. I wanted to see further, to go further to find that new end of the earth that my fellow campers and I had so casually pushed back.

Cyrus, awakening early one morning east of the Caspian Sea, must have felt the same way. Though he marched further east than any Greek or Persian before him, he did not succeed in discovering the end of the world. He merely displaced that limit to some new location beyond the next mountain range. And that only tantalized him to the point of lunacy, such that, twice hearing Tomyris' predictions of disaster, all he could do was to look away toward the east, pretend not to hear or believe, and march off a cliff to oblivion and blood-engorgement. Prophecy should slacken our thirst for the end of the world, to find the end of the world. It does no such thing.

A friend recently returned from a ten-day cruise to Alaska. Among his fellow shipmates were several baby boomers who applauded and oohed at the sight of melting glaciers, with apparently no trace of irony. There flickered in their well-meaning faces no awareness that human actions have made the collapse of the Arctic into entertainment. He saw a lake the size of San Diego's Mission Bay, one that a year ago had been a solid glacier. The tour guides said that this sort of cruise would no longer be marketable in a few years given the current rate of melting. The glaciers and fjords would be gone, replaced with oversized puddles. And yet there was still enough of a sense of what used to be there for my friend to fall sadly in love with the place. Where the world's lines of longitude converge into a single pole, the past and future meet. The prophecy of the Arctic has been clear enough for some time, at least for those not intent on denial. And that prophecy addresses humanity just as Tomyris addressed Cyrus, warning him of the

future even as it acknowledges the futility of that warning. That end of the world, that geographical extremity, is perhaps where we can foresee the end of the world most clearly.

I will not make it to the Arctic before the end. But I have some recordings by Thomas Köner, and so I go there late at night, when the sounds of the outside world have momentarily abated. Köner's recordings all share a tendency to evade not only description, but even the sense that one has even listened to them at all. In "Teimo," for instance, waves of low-frequency drones and rumbles wash in and out like the tide, and higher tones occasionally enter.¹⁵ Köner knows the Arctic well—he spent some years of his childhood in the region—and can evoke the Arctic's vastness and emptiness better than any other sound artist or composer has ever done. Just like Celer, he knows the power of pairing the very low with the very high, but to this he adds the very slow movement of a glacier. (At least they used to be slow. As my friend assures me, they break apart quickly now.) And so the most remarkable thing about Köner's music is the sense that one has not, and cannot, apprehend it in its entirety. So much of it eludes perception by dwelling at the extremes of our acoustic or temporal perception. Change thus manifests only in retrospect, when it suddenly becomes audible that the texture of a track's end is far different from its beginning. Instead, Köner relentlessly posits an elsewhere, an extreme point, something to which we strain to listen and whose position we hope someday to reach. Failing that, for of course we will utterly fail in that campaign, we merely sit back and listen to what sounds like eternity, something unknowable, unfathomable, and unchanging.

Notes

1. Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. John Marincola (London: Penguin, 2003), 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 23.
3. Near-verbatim transcription of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I: 1, 1094a1–18.
4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I: 10, 1100a10.
5. Plato, *Gorgias*, 512e.
6. Celer's music can be heard at <http://www.celer.bandcamp.com>.
7. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (New York: Penguin, 1999), 27–28.
8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X:7, 1177b33.
9. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam, 1988), 57.
10. *Ibid.*, 57.
11. *Ibid.*, 219.
12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. AV Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 129.

13. Herodotus, 93.
14. Herodotus, 94.
15. Thomas Köner, *Nunatuk—Teimo—Permafrost*. Type Recordings, 2010. TYPE 072.

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